

Senator

DAN SWECKER

Serving Lewis County and part of Thurston County

END OF SESSION REVIEW

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Senate Committees:

- Transportation (Ranking Republican Member)
- Natural Resources, Ocean & Recreation

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

On April 24, the state Legislature completed its 105-day session. As usual, many important issues faced the Legislature during its 2005 session, including:

- Passing a new state operating budget while facing a \$1.5 billion revenue shortfall;
- Reforming a state elections system in the wake of the controversial governor's election; and
- Continuing to fix Washington's unsafe and crowded highways.

This newsletter takes a close look at the new state operating and transportation budgets, as well as how I voted on them and why.

If you wish to have more information about the issues covered in this newsletter or other issues before the Legislature this year, or if you have questions or concerns about a state government matter, please let me know. You can contact my Olympia office by mail, e-mail, phone or fax.

The newsletter also includes the results of the constituent survey that was included in my 2005-06 Government Guide.

I appreciate having the opportunity to serve you in the Legislature. I take great pride in the 20th District and am honored to represent you.

Sincerely,



Dan Swecker

State Senator

20th Legislative District



New operating budget unsustainable, too costly

Throughout the legislative session, budget writers knew that the state would face some kind of revenue shortfall as they tried to create a 2005-07 state operating budget.

In March, some good news was received when the state Revenue Forecast Council said the state's revenue shortfall would be "only" \$1.5 billion, a smaller amount than what many observers had feared. The March revenue forecast made many people hope that the next operating budget – like the 2003-05 spending plan that incorporated the "Priorities of Government" process – could be crafted once again without resorting to higher taxes. Unfortunately, those hopes were dashed.

On the final weekend of the session, the Legislature passed a new two-year, \$26 billion state operating budget (ESSB 6090). I voted against the operating budget for these important reasons:

- It raises taxes by about \$400 million. These tax hikes include:
 - ✓ a partial reinstatement of the estate tax (also known as the "death tax"), which was ruled unconstitutional by the state Supreme Court earlier this year (the budget exempts estates up

to \$1.5 million this year and up to \$2 million in 2006);

- ✓ a 60-cent-per-pack increase in the cigarette tax;
 - ✓ a \$1.33-per-liter liquor tax; and
 - ✓ sales tax on extended warranties.
- It increases state spending by 11.7 percent over the 2003-05 budget – with only a 7 percent revenue increase. That 7 percent should have been enough to cover the state's spending needs over the next two years.



Sen. Swecker asks a question during a committee hearing.

- Because of several budget "gimmicks," it won't be sustainable two years from now, meaning that the state likely will face another budget deficit in 2007.

A no-new-taxes operating budget was possible

Before House Democrat and Senate Democrat budget negotiators worked out an agreement, Senate Republicans offered an alternative budget that didn't rely on new or higher taxes. This budget would have fully funded the two recent education initiatives – I-728 (lower class sizes) and I-732 (pay increases for teachers) – while expanding access and enrollments for higher education. It also created a more sustainable budget that reduces reliance on one-time funds, enacts more ongoing savings, and leaves a larger reserve fund balance. Unfortunately, the Democrat budget writers in the House and Senate ignored this sensible solution.

Senate narrowly defeats gay rights bill

A bill adding sexual orientation to the list of protected classes in Washington was narrowly defeated this year. The measure, House Bill 1515, lost on a 25-24 vote on the Senate floor. It had passed in the House earlier in the session.

I voted against the measure, known by many as the gay rights bill, because I believe it is unnecessary and wrong to give extra protection to a class of citizens based on behavior that many in our state oppose. I also opposed this measure because it could possibly open the door to lawsuits against landlords, business owners and other citizens accused of discrimination. Once an allegation of discrimina-

tion is made, employers and others accused of discrimination have the difficult burden of proving they didn't base their decision on the person's sexual orientation.

Several years ago, Washington voters rejected, by a 60-40 margin, Initiative 677, a gay rights measure that prohibited unfair employment practices on the basis of sexual orientation. That initiative failed in 38 of Washington's 39 counties, including Lewis and Thurston counties.

Even in opposing HB 1515, I still support fair treatment for all. I just don't believe that more government regulation is necessary in this case.

New transportation budget, revenue package helps continue highway improvements

After 10 years as a state senator, I've come to realize that transportation is arguably the most critical issue facing Washington. We need good, safe roads and highways that can handle our growing population and economy – and the growing traffic problems that accompany them.

Many of us have gotten stuck in stop-and-go traffic on I-5, not only in the Puget Sound region but even in Southwest Washington. Many of us have driven past terrible accidents on I-5 or other highways, or have heard or read about fatal crashes on unsafe highways or bridges.

For the reasons listed above, I supported the \$8 billion, 16-year state transportation spending package passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Gregoire. This package funds more than 200 needed highway, bridge and intersection improvements throughout Washington.

The key part of the revenue package is an incremental 9.5-cent-per-gallon increase in the state gas tax over four years. The gas tax hike is 3 cents this year, 3 cents in 2006, 2 cents in 2007 and 1.5 cents in 2008. A portion of the new gas tax revenue will go toward local road and street projects. This should help cities fix potholes and other street problems.

The money from the gas tax increase will be spent on fixing highways throughout Washington. The state constitution restricts the use

of these funds to highways and ferries. There is a clear link between the state gas tax and its benefits. Gas tax revenues cannot be siphoned off for other programs of government.

The new transportation spending plan will enable the state to make safety improvements to many bridges and highways throughout the state, including some in the 20th Legislative District:

- \$160 million over a 10-year period to widen Interstate 5 from the Mellen Street Overpass to the Grand Mound Overpass; and

- \$30 for vehicles between 6,000 and 8,000 lbs., such as a Ford three-quarter-ton crew cab pickup.

Motor homes will be charged a flat weight fee of \$75 a year. The fee for light utility trailers weighing less than 2,000 lbs. will drop from \$30 to \$15 per year.

The new funding package allows Washington to continue the progress it started in 2003 to improve its highway and transportation system. Two years ago, through the passage of the Nickel Fund (a 5-cent state gas tax increase in which the extra revenue

was earmarked for a certain list of highway projects), we finally began to address the long backlog of highway project needs. But the money raised by the Nickel Fund isn't enough to pay for all of the needed projects in the future. We need extra money to pay for future highway needs, including some key mega-projects like replacing Seattle's unstable Alaskan Way Viaduct and 520 floating bridge across Lake Washington. This additional revenue will help us do that.

Thanks to the insistence of Republicans, the package includes \$4 million over two years for the state auditor to conduct full, independent, third-party performance audits of all of the functions and projects of the Department of Transportation. It's important to have independent audits to make sure our transportation system is functioning like it should. Coupled with some long-needed transportation reforms enacted in 2003, our transportation system will continue to spend tax dollars more effectively and efficiently.



- \$12 million to repair the Rock Creek bridges on State Route 6 and \$6.65 million to replace the State Route 6 bridge over the South Fork of the Chehalis River.

The revenue package also includes a new annual weight fee for vehicles (with multi-modal transportation, rail and highways each receiving one-third of the weight fee revenue):

- \$10 for vehicles up to 4,000 lbs., such as a Ford Taurus;
- \$20 for vehicles between 4,000 and 6,000 lbs., such as a Ford Expedition; and

Here are the 20th District survey results

Early this session, I mailed out a 2005-06 Government Guide for the 20th Legislative District. The Government Guide included a brief survey. I originally planned to send the survey results to only those respondents who requested them, but so many wanted the results that I decided to include them in this newsletter. So here are the survey results.

1. Do you favor moving the primary election from mid-September to at least one month earlier so there is more time for absentee ballots to be counted to determine the candidates in the November general election?

Yes—64.96 percent

No—35.04 percent

2. Do you favor changing the state constitution so school levies can pass with a simple majority (at least 50 percent) instead of the current supermajority (at least 60 percent) requirement?

Yes—22.42 percent

No—77.58 percent

3. Medical malpractice insurance premiums have skyrocketed for doctors in recent years, causing some doctors to close their practice. Would you favor a monetary cap in noneconomic damages for medical malpractice awards

if it resulted in better access for patients to their doctors?

Yes—76.49 percent

No—23.51 percent

4. The state Legislature will soon start working on the 2005-07 state operating budget. The budget is expected to face a revenue shortfall of about \$1.8 billion. Should taxes be increased to cover this deficit?

Yes—4.26 percent

No—60.73 percent

Maybe part of it—35.01 percent

5. Please mark the areas of need where you think a tax increase might be warranted: (Next to each of these areas is the estimated cost as mentioned in former Gov. Locke's budget proposal in December.)

A. Salary increases for teachers—15.56 percent

B. Smaller K-12 class sizes—13.4 percent

C. Salary increases for state employees—9.03 percent

D. Continued Basic Health Plan coverage for low-income citizens—25.36 percent

E. More enrollment slots for students in public colleges—12.6 percent

F. None—24.05 percent

6. Which tax or taxes would you favor raising to pay for these programs? (Various tax increases on pop, beer, wine and liquor under former Gov. Locke's proposal would raise \$504 million. A 1-cent increase in the sales tax would raise \$1 billion.)

A. "Sin tax" on beverages—28.27 percent

B. Tax on doctors—3.34 percent

C. Tax on lawyers—16.0 percent

D. Sales tax—14.87 percent

E. Property tax—7.86 percent

F. Business taxes—5.56 percent

G. None—24.1 percent



Sen. Swecker visits with a tribal elder following a ceremony honoring the Chinook Tribe in Olympia.

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